World Peace

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(English Translation of Shri Jagdish Prasad Mandal's Maithili Short book ‘Vishwa Shanti’)

Rameshwar Prasad Mandal

Pallavi Prakashan
Berma/Nirmali

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Who is the great son of the earth?
Whose praise are always sung,;
The wonderful diamond of Mithila,
Language craftsman, literaturer eminent.

R.Prasad.

Preface

☰

'World Peace' is the English translation of the well-known literary work 'Vishwa Shanti', an anthology of short stories authored by Shri Jagdish Prasad Mandal who has carved a niche for himself in the temple of Maithili literature with his immense contribution to the different genres. The recipient of more than a dozen awards including the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award and Tagore Literary Award, the writer Mandalji has enriched the literary spheres of poetry, drama and novel with his numerous notable books. His constant publication of short story books resulting in 83 anthologies of 1012 short stories has wonder-stuck the readers with their unprecedented frequency of their successive publications.

A short story is defined as a concise work of narrative prose fiction that can be read in a single sitting. The modern short story as a distinct literary form has the core elements of fiction including plot,

characters, setting, conflict and theme. Unlike a novel it is much more focused and aims to create a “unity of effect or impression” as defined by Edger Allan Poe. Short stories are significantly shorter than novels with word counts typically ranging from 1000 to 7500 words, though there are variations like flash fiction which can be under 1000 words.

‘Vishwa Shanti’ (World Peace) along with ‘Gamak Jinagi’, ‘Swatantra Vyaktitwa’ and ‘Vicharak Mor’ is the most famous short story anthology of Shri Jagdish Prasad Mandal. In almost all the ten short stories of the anthology certain riddles of life are explained to the young generation by learned teachers or wise elders of the villages. The title story ‘Vishwa Shanti’ focuses on the three elements of the world-Brahma that is knowledge, Soul, that is life and Maya, that is manifestation. Further, it is disclosed that peace is born in human heart when knowledge is transformed into trust. The story ‘Between Two Grindstones’ highlights how people are crushed between two grindstones of power and abundance. The story captioned ‘One Storke, all Accomplished’ reveals the truth that if everyone works with steady mind, the family and the society will flourish with steadiness.

‘The Moon’s Journey’ co-relates science with religion. In the story ‘Desolate’ the story-writer through the character of Shyam Babu unveils how goodness does exist amidst prevailing evils. In

‘Changing Thoughts, Diminishing Hope’ the story of the tragic married life of Manoj and Sheela highlights the truth that when one’s thoughts incline towards the good, hope and faith flourish but when they drift toward the ignoble ideas hope and faith wither. The story ‘For Whom Did I Do It’ reflects the evils of generation gap. In the story ‘Service’ the philanthropic work of the adoption of a deserted child is encouraged. ‘The Poverty of True Vision’ presents an interesting story of how tricksters with their petty cheats distort Indian spiritual philosophy. ‘Under Thirty-Two Teeth’ tells the true meaning of the adage.

The writer and retired teacher, shri Rameshwar Prasad Mandal has done the commendable work of translating shri Jagdish Prasad Mandal’s popular Maithili book of short stories ‘Vishwa Shanti’ into English so that it may reach the hands of the English readers. In fact, the translation of a literary work from one language to the other widens the world of readers and provides a broad acceptability to the literary piece. We cannot forget that shri Rabindranath Tagore's ‘Gitanjali’ got universal acclaim only after it was translated into English. Written originally in Bengali in 1910 Tagore translated the poetic work into English with the title ‘Gitanjali: song offerings’. It was published in 1912 with an introduction by William Butler Yeats. In 1913 Tagore was honoured with the Nobel Prize for this book as

the first non-European and Indian recipient of the prestigious award.

There are certain norms to be followed by the translators. In this respect shri Rameshwar Prasad Mandal has done justice to the translation work. I hope that English readers will relish the literary taste of this English version of the original Maithili book of short stories.

- Ram Ashish Singh

Former Principal,
H.P.S. College, Nirmali,
B.N Mandal University,
Madhepura (Bihar)
Mob- +91 99316 63744

Prologue

☰

In today's age of thirst for human blood, where the market of robbery, snatching, kidnapping, rape, murdering and sexual exploitation etc is hot everywhere and human duty is vanishing, the world is terrified by the terror of terrorists, brotherhood is vanishing, love is turning into hatred, mothers and sisters have come out on the road and they are crying for help, the ground of politics is shaking and the common people are feeling uneasy, livelihood and good education are being stopped, in such a difficult situation, who can wipe their tears?, how can a beautiful pitcher be made when there is no good clay?

I have read so many books of honored shri Jagdish Prasad Mandal, an eminent literature of modern age. He has been writing for society and human welfare. As a great philosopher and thinker, he has given us a priceless book like Vishv Shanti as a ray of light for the welfare of mankind at a time when the whole world is wandering in the darkness of

unrest, that is praiseworthy.

'Vishwa Shanti' is one of those golden books. It contains in 10 heartrending stories, all of which are one after the other is very remarkable and are inspiring and heart touching. I would say that this is the only book that can prepare like the soil for world peace and can give sweet fruits by planting human trees.

I am so impressed by its importance that's why I decided to translate this. When a book is translated in another languages, the scope of propagation of ideas, feelings and good messages expand, because the hues numbers of readers increase. I have chosen English language to translate, because English is an international language, so I have written this book in English language for English readers.

You must have heard or read that honored Rabindra Nath Tagore's book Gitanjali had been translated into English by Butler the great and after it Gitanjali had been awarded with Nobel prize so that honored R. K. Narayan's book The Guide had also translated into Hindi for the Hindi cinema.

The respected author Shri Jagdish Prasad Mandal has been awarded or decorated with Sahitya Academy Award New Delhi for the novel Pangu and he is rich in awards. He has become a century maker by writing more than a hundred books. He is a source

of my impression and a guide for me. Before this translation I have translated his awarded novel Pangu in Hindi and Jagdish Prasad Mandal Ekata biography by Gajendra Thakur written in Maithili, in Hindi.

For this noble works. I have received great sympathy and help from many scholars, writers and friends etc., which is highly commendable and praiseworthy for me. In this series I want to respect to Dr Umesh Mandal ,a good author, a learned man and a man of words, who helped me in my wants, now I am grateful to respected editor Gajendra Thakur, a well-known writer, an adviser, I am thankful to my most respected Gurudev Dr .Ram Ashish Singh, former principal an author and learned man, who has given me valuable suggestions, Er Param Anand Kumar, respected teacher Ramashish Suman and Pallavi publication Team Nirmali etc.

After closely studying this original book 'Vishwa Shanti' and keeping its basic facts in my mind, I have translated this book into English, entitled 'World Peace.

I have full faith that it will achieve its intended purposes, English readers will benefit from it, at the same time it will become the voice of modern complex human civilization and will prove to be a milestone for humanly wayward travelers.

Reaching someone's feelings and thoughts is

not a child's play. Errors or mistakes are natural things, because no person is perfect. Your costly suggestions are required for this.

I have full faith that like before, this time too I will get your love and heavenly blessing. Thanks a lot.

Where will one get mangoes from the acacia tree that one has planted?

So, we should pray for world peace.

Many thanks again.

With regards

- Rameshwar Prasad Mandal

Retired teacher, H.M.

U. High school Basuara

Block - Ghoghardiha, Madhubani.

At - Sundar Bhawan Nirmali, Nag mandir.

Mob: +91 99735 41877.

Dated the 6th September 2025

Between Two Grindstones

☰

The first light of dawn had not yet broken when Dhirendraji came striding home, his footsteps echoing with a determined dham-dham. The weather was pleasant. It was the end of the month of Phagun, and unlike other years, there had been no cold wave. True, a breeze from the east was blowing, but its gentle pace made it feel comforting.

Only half an hour earlier, I had gone out for a walk, to take in the fresh morning air. The paths were smooth. Three years ago, a paved road had been built from the National Highway leading into the village, flanked on both sides by ponds. The pond on the southern side and the one on the northern side, where in the last flood they had broken the embankment, had been filled and overlaid with the pitch road. Now, there was no trace of muddy slush anywhere.

Before that road was made, during the monsoon, so much water would collect in the

breached pond that it stayed until late winter. Even then, it never entirely stopped people from crossing, for they would simply cut across the adjoining paddy fields. There were few motor vehicles in the village, so even if water lingered, it did not truly block movement. When a Tonga or rickshaw approached, passengers would dismount and walk across the field, while the empty vehicle was pulled over.

The field-path crossing belonged to someone or the other, and the landowner might protest, but travelers never paid much heed. This was not a one-time occurrence, it had been happening year after year until three years ago.

When Dhirendraji reached my house, I was not there. Upon inquiry, he learned that I had gone walking toward the south. Taking his younger son along, he set off down the southern road to find me. By the time I was returning from my walk, I spotted him. Though we were still a little distance apart, I recognized his face. A thought crossed my mind, why would Dhirendraji come so early in the morning? I knew him well enough to greet, but we had no deeper connection.

Step by step, I moved forward; step by step, so did he. As soon as we met, I greeted him.

"Namaskar, Dhirendra Bhai."

He returned my greeting with equal warmth.

"Namaskar. I came here just to meet you."

With a touch of appreciative courtesy, I replied- "It is my good fortune to have your darshan. Let us go to my house. We can sit and talk at leisure there."

Dhirendraji walked ahead, and I followed behind. Along the way, we passed a pond. Around this pond, houses had sprung up on all four sides, and my own home stood on its eastern bank. Pointing toward it, I said- "Dhirendraji, you must have a pond like this in your village as well. But this one was not dug by the villagers, it was dug by a demon."

Smiling, Dhirendraji replied-

"A widow or a demon, neither has disappeared. They still live among us in one village after another, just as they did before."

The way he spoke was as if answering from his own inner reasoning, just as I had spoken. Yet his response left me uncertain about what exactly he meant. I kept silent.

By then we had reached near my house. At the doorway, I said- "Brother, this is the cottage of the poor. So do not trouble yourself with thoughts of honor or dishonor. It is my good fortune that someone like you has come to my home."

In a firm tone, Dhirendraji said- "Gopikrishna, there is no such thing as fortune or misfortune. It is all part of the human play."

I said- “First, have some breakfast and tea. Later, we will sit and talk in peace.”

Dhirendraji replied- “I never eat breakfast in morning. I eat once in the day and once at night. So I will not have breakfast, only tea.”

Insisting, I said- “You rarely come here, and today when you finally come, you say you will not have breakfast?”

Growing serious, Dhirendraji explained-

“Gopikrishna, I neither have a job that gives me a steady income nor my parents have pension I can rely on. So I live according to the means I earn for myself, and in that simplicity, I find my own contentment.”

Hearing Dhirendraji’s words, I felt convinced that his thinking was indeed of a high order. Just then my younger daughter, Kunti, arrived at the doorway carrying tea. Picking up a cup from the tray, I handed it to Dhirendraji and asked-

“Would you like some water as well?”

Dhirendraji said- “I am not really thirsty, but I will take a couple of sips.”

As soon as he spoke, Kunti placed the tray on the low stool, went to the courtyard, and returned with a lota of water and a glass. She poured water from the lota into the glass and offered it to him. After drinking, Dhirendraji remarked- “Just as the water in your tube

tastes fresh, so does the water from my own tube well."

He set the glass down on the stool, and we both began drinking tea. After two or three sips, Dhirendraji said- "Gopikrishna, you have not even asked why I have come here."

Defending myself, I replied- "Dhirendraji, is that something to ask? We studied together in high school, we are friends. When a friend comes to visit another friend, how could I ask why you have come?"

By the time we finished our tea and set the cups back on the tray, I had taken out my betel box and begun to prepare a paan. Dhirendraji said- "Gopikrishna, I do not eat paan. You have it yourself."

Feigning dismay, I said- "Dhirendraji, here in Mithila, paan and makhana are linked with our culture. Why should you neglect it?"

Without the slightest change in expression, Dhirendraji replied- "I avoid paan because it damages the teeth. The cultural point you have raised will not be upheld merely by chewing paan and eating makhana. Culture is like an ornament of life, something that adds beauty and dignity to living. And for that, our attention should be elsewhere."

I asked- "What do you mean, Dhirendraji?"

He explained- "There is a saying in our villages that loose soil crumbles easily. Petty ideas will not be

replaced simply by reciting grand ones. The culture of Mithila is one of universal brotherhood, yet in recent times we have dug so many unnecessary pits and ditches that we have damaged the very form of our culture. Like children who repeat the word culture over and over without understanding it, we get nowhere.”

I chewed my paan and offered two cardamoms to Dhirendraji. After placing one in his mouth, he said- “Today, in your village, meaning Bansbitti, there is a plan to hold a general assembly.”

Until that moment, I had no knowledge of this. Whether the idea had just occurred to him or someone had told him earlier, I could not tell. So what could I say? I simply replied-

“Whatever responsibility you give me, I will carry it out, will I not?”

Dhirendraji said- “Gopikrishna, the public here is asleep. They take pleasure in their slumber, and the looting class, like a mischievous goat kid, keeps patting them on the head to lull them into even deeper sleep.”

I could not fully grasp his meaning, so I asked- “What do you mean, Dhirendraji?”

He explained- “First, people cling to the glories of the past, and second, the clever members of the looting class encourage this attachment so much that

people stop looking at the present altogether. Of course, everyone should know about the past, but to measure oneself solely by it and think of oneself as perfect is to deceive one's own life."

Still not entirely understanding, I said-

"Dhirendraji, please make it clearer."

Hearing this, Dhirendraji reflected for a moment and said-

"Gopikrishna, just as time is divided into three periods, life too can be seen in three phases. The past is what has already gone by, which we call history. The present is the period we are living in right now. And the future is what is yet to come, the kind of life we want to create for ourselves."

In grammar, I had studied past, present, and future, but always as measures of time. I had never thought of them as measures of life. This thought now struck me, and I said-

"Please make it even simpler, Dhirendraji."

Dhirendraji said- "In our society, that is, among the people here, just as there are retellings and interpretations of the Mahabharata, there are also those of the Ramayana. People try to model their lives on these stories and indeed wish to do so. But just as the Ramayana belongs to a bygone era, so does the Mahabharata. These are accounts of life from thousands of years ago. Day by day, minute by

minute, time moves forward on its own course. Life today should match the pace of the present age, yet that is not happening. People have developed a habit of either keeping themselves fixed in the past or getting lost in dreams of the future. There is not much time now to speak further. First, let us complete the work for which I have come, and then we can continue our discussions."

He had barely finished when Duniyalal arrived. Duniyalal was my neighbor and also a graduate. As soon as he came, I said-

"Duniyalal, Dhirendraji is holding a general assembly in our village today, so you should assist him."

Duniyalal replied- "Gopi Bhaiya, I am ready to do whatever you say, but first please introduce me to him."

Hearing his words, I said- "Duniyalal, Dhirendraji is my high school friend. It is true that we have met today after fifteen years since high school, so Dhirendraji will tell you about himself in that gap. But I can tell you what our friendship was like back then."

Duniyalal listened to me with interest, his ears alert, and then turned his gaze toward Dhirendraji, studying his face. Dhirendraji also looked back at him. I continued-

"Duniyalal, we both studied at the same high

school. Dhirendraji was a science student, and I was an art student. Whenever a teacher was absent, Dhirendraji would take the class. The way the teachers taught, he would teach in the same way."

Duniyalal said- "In that case, Dhirendraji must be quite a remarkable man."

I said- "In the matriculation board examination, Dhirendraji had secured a good rank. What happened afterward, he will tell you himself."

Duniyalal shifted his gaze from me to Dhirendraji. Dhirendraji said- "After matriculation, I enrolled at L. S. College. At that time, Mithila University had not yet been established, though there was much discussion about its formation. I passed Intermediate Science in the first division, with first rank. I took Physics as my honors subject. In B.Sc. too, I secured first place with honors, and the same in M.Sc."

In between, Duniyalal exclaimed- "Wonderful, wonderful."

Dhirendraji continued-

"Shortly after completing my M.Sc., I was appointed as a scientist at the government institute ISRO. After working there for six months, the institute dismissed me, declaring me insane. I left from there."

Duniyalal asked- "If the institute dismissed you calling you insane, why did you not file a case?"

Dhirendraji replied- "Who is not mad in some way? Why should I get entangled in the snare of unnecessary cases and lawsuits? After leaving there, I got a job in the Physics Department of Darbhanga College. After working there for a year, they too dismissed me, again calling me mad."

Duniyalal asked- "What do you do now?"

Dhirendraji said-

"I live in the village. My parents have grown old. I am the only one in the household. I have a wife and a son. Now I don't want to do any jobs and service again. I will do social work."

Duniyalal asked- "Will you be able to find satisfaction in social work?"

Dhirendraji replied- "Why would I not? Only those fail to find satisfaction in social work who have no issues before their eyes. But I can see the issues clearly. I see with my own eyes that society is so deeply asleep that it cannot even discern what is good or bad for itself. Helping it to understand the difference between good and bad, that is my service. With that thought in mind, I have taken this step."

What Duniyalal understood of Dhirendraji's ideas, and how much he grasped, only Duniyalal would know. Yet in my own mind I felt that the purpose for which Dhirendraji was trying to take a step forward was indeed something society needed.

At that moment, Dhirendraji said-

"Gopikrishna, it is not good to spend time just sitting and talking. Let us first go around the village and inform as many people as possible that there will be a general assembly at two o'clock in the afternoon, and invite them to take part."

The three of us, Dhirendraji, Duniyalal, and I, set out toward the village. We had taken only ten steps when we met Shyam Uncle on the road. Pointing toward Dhirendraji, I said to Shyam Uncle- "Uncle, his house is in Khairboni. He is our neighbor. Today at two o'clock there will be a general assembly in the village, so please be there."

Shyam Uncle was about to respond when, in the meantime, Dhirendraji said- "You are a respected elder in every way, so please take the responsibility of presiding over today's meeting."

After a brief pause, Shyam Uncle said-

"If there is a meeting in the village, I will certainly be there."

Dhirendraji said- "Gopikrishna, it will be difficult to go door to door and inform everyone, especially as time is short. Instead, let us go through the lanes, telling two or four people in each, and keep moving."

Until now, only a handful of active individuals in the village had participated in social or political activities. The rest had kept their distance. Why they

stayed away had many reasons, which we will not go into now. For the present, it is enough to say that after hearing Dhirendraji's ideas, even those who had never attended a general assembly or any public meeting before agreed to come.

By eleven o'clock, the three of us had gone around the entire village. We told everyone we met and then returned home. Once there, I said to Dhirendraji,

"Dhirendraji, take a bath here, have your meal, and rest for a while. Later we will go to the general assembly together."

Dhirendraji replied- "My home is not far. It will take fifteen or twenty minutes to go and the same to return. If I go, I can tell my wife that I will be attending the meeting and might be a little late, and I can also see my parents and remind them to take their medicines."

Dhirendraji left. After he had gone, Shyam Uncle came and said-

"Gopikrishna, since it is a village meeting, we should be the ones to arrange for it."

Hearing his thoughts, I said- "Uncle, that is indeed how it should be. You are an experienced man, how do you think we should proceed?"

Shyam Uncle said- "If we had known ten or fifteen days earlier, we could have planned everything

properly. But since this was decided in a hurry, at the very least we should arrange seating for the people, a microphone, and tea and refreshments for Dhirendraji.”

I said- “Dhirendraji is my friend, so I will arrange the tea and refreshments here at my place. You all can arrange the seating for the gathering.”

Shyam Uncle said- “I have three mats of my own, and Ruplal has two large durries. If we borrow his, we can spread all five mats and durries in front of the school. That would be a good place to hold the meeting.”

In the middle of this, Duniyalal said- “Shyam Uncle, I will take that responsibility.”

Shyam Uncle looked at me and said- “Gopikrishna, since the general assembly is to be held in our village, we bear the responsibility to ensure that it runs smoothly. People should not have the chance to laugh at us.”

I replied- “When we all work with full commitment, that will not happen. The program is at two o’clock, so in the time that remains, we can finish all the preparations.”

Shyam Uncle said to Duniyalal,

“Duniyalal, come with me. I will speak to Ruplal, and you go with someone to fetch both my mats and Ruplal’s durries and spread them neatly in front of the

school."

I added- "There are several people in the village who own his loudspeakers. Choose the best one and ask the owner to play the national song from the start and make announcements in between."

Shyam Uncle said- "Sohan's speaker is the best. He bought it recently, and for a public meeting he will not charge anything."

I said- "Uncle, he is your man."

Shyam Uncle replied- "When the village is ours, are the people of the village strangers? That responsibility too falls on me."

I said- "Uncle, we have only two to two-and-a-half hours left. In that time, we must also bathe, eat, and get ready, besides arranging the mats and the microphone. So let everyone get to their own tasks."

At half past one, Dhirendraji arrived with Manesar, Rasiklal, and Pradeep. Taking all four with me, I went to the school. People had begun to gather in ones and twos. There were no women, but some female students from the schools and colleges had also come. Seeing the crowd grow, Dhirendraji's heart was filled with enthusiasm.

The program began. Shyam Uncle took the chair as president, and at that moment, Dhirendraji said- "I would like to request the villagers that if anyone has a question in mind, they should raise it."

I said- “Dhirendraji, this is the first day such a program is being held in the village. So let us not put the villagers on the spot. Please share your ideas clearly so that everyone can understand them.”

Shyam Uncle said- “Friends, Dhirendraji is presenting his thoughts, so, everyone, listen with attention.”

Dhirendraji stood up and said- “Friends, Kabir Das once said- ‘Watching the grinding mill, Kabir weeps. Between the two grinding stones, not a single grain remains whole.’ The flow of time is the most powerful force, and it is this that Kabir pointed toward. Yet people fail to truly understand it. We must reflect carefully on what these two grinding stones are and how people are crushed between them.

“Think of it this way: on one side is the king, and on the other is the pauper. The king is full to the brim with everything, while the pauper, the beggar, has nothing except his own body. Why is it that one human being is a king and another a beggar, when both are human? This is the inequality among people in society.

“Just as on one side are the wealthy, whose lives are filled with every possible possession, from homes and food to every luxury, so on the other side there are people who have nothing at all. No food in their stomachs, no clothes on their bodies, no shelter over

their heads, and no means to meet the basic needs of life.

"This inequality is not new. Since the time human beings first appeared on earth, it has existed in one form or another. I will not speak here about the history of human origin. For now, it is enough to say that from the smallest village to the entire world, this inequality is everywhere.

"In the midst of this inequality, two classes have emerged: the oppressor and the oppressed. Because of this, human life has become worse than the life of animals. It has affected everything, including wealth, religion, desire, and liberation. Today, we have gathered here to understand this inequality clearly. Until such inequality is removed, human well-being is impossible. Though a person may be human in form, his life will remain far from what it means to live as a human being.

"In thought and speech, one may say that all people are human, that everyone's life should be lived with dignity, that everyone's needs should be met, that all children should be educated, that society should be harmonious. But these will remain nothing more than words meant to please the mind.

"Until harmony enters life, until everyone has the means to live, the situation will remain as it is today, where a handful of people enjoy abundance

while the vast majority live in poverty. I appeal to all of you to recognize yourselves and fulfill your responsibilities. That is all I have to say today.” ❑

One Stroke, All Accomplished

☰

For the past seven or eight days my mind has felt detached, estranged both from family and from society. This evening, after finishing my daily routines, I sat on the verandah and the thought rose within me that death would be better than such a life.

Just then my wife came with tea. I had not the slightest desire to drink it. She placed the cup on the low table before me and stood by my side. I knew she wished to talk. She would have spoken as on other days, recounting the events of the day, what tasks had been completed, which were left half done, and which had not been done at all.

I picked up the cup of tea from the table. Though my heart was not in it, habit compelled me to lift it to my lips. Every sip felt tasteless, as though all flavour had been drained away. Still, I forced myself to drink.

Seeing her standing before me, I understood clearly that she wanted to speak, but I had not the faintest urge for conversation. So I kept my mouth shut. Somehow I emptied the cup, set it back on the table, and she carried it away. Not a single word passed between us.

My mind had grown so bitter from the behaviour of family and of society alike that it seemed death was better than life. What needless entanglement had I fallen into? Neither the conduct of my own kin was good, nor that of the people in the community. To live in such a family or in such a society was to lead a life worse than that of an animal.

Inside, I was so unsettled that I felt I could die at that very moment. The thought kept rising again and again that death would be better than this life. Silently I began speaking to God in my heart, asking Him to grant me a single cubit of space. But what difference would my wishes make?

At last, when I could bear it no more, I thought that the night was still young. The first dusk had passed, the second had only just begun. Why not go to Manmohan Uncle and share all that weighed upon me? He was older and wiser than I, and his life experience was far greater. Surely he would suggest some way forward.

In the meantime my wife, perhaps for the second time, appeared at the door with the thought of

talking. But my heart, hardened by the ways of both family and society, had lost all desire to live even for another moment. She stood in the doorway before me, yet I did not even feel like looking at her. She too said nothing, though she knew well why she kept silent.

I rose quietly from the bench and set out for Manmohan Uncle's house. As I was leaving, my wife asked- "Where are you going in the dark?"

I replied- "Nowhere far, just to have a word with Manmohan Uncle."

She asked- "How long will you be?"

I said- "It will not take long. I will stand there, exchange a few words, hear his reply, and return."

My wife went silently back into the courtyard, and I went on my way to Manmohan Uncle's. I set out, but such darkness spread before my mind that nothing was clear. His house was not far from mine, so I felt no difficulty in going. In a rush of determination I had left, but on the path sudden thoughts began to crowd my mind. I could not tell whether my feet were falling on the road or off it. My eyes felt shut, my senses dulled, and yet I kept moving forward.

I had no idea when I passed his house. Only when I had gone nearly two fields beyond did I suddenly come to my senses. Realising my mistake, I

turned back toward his house. As I drew near, many questions kept stirring in my mind. At last I reached his doorway.

Manmohan Uncle was telling his wife-

“Just as everyone has his own duty, everyone also has his own limits. One must be mindful of those limits. Why step into another’s sphere and interfere without cause?”

Sudhiya Aunty, his wife, had been scolding her daughter-in-law. The reason was this: the little boy, her grandson, had reached for a glass of milk kept by the stove for making tea. As he tried to lift it to drink, it slipped from his hands and spilled. The boy’s mother, Kumudini, struck him twice, making him cry. Sudhiya Kaki became upset and said- “Why did you hit the child so harshly?”

Still irritated about the spilt milk, Kumudini replied- “If I don’t discipline a headstrong child like this, he will never give up his wilfulness.”

That was enough to spark an argument between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, and Manmohan Uncle, having heard the quarrel, was trying to calm his wife when I arrived.

Grief had so dulled my senses that I forgot even to greet him. As soon as he saw me, he asked-

“What brings you here at such an hour, Ramgulam?”

His voice seemed to wake me from my daze. I said-

"Uncle, I bow to you."

He blessed me and asked-

"May you be well. But why have you come out in the dark?"

I said- "Uncle, when I see the ways of my family, and when I see the ways of the people in society, I feel death would be better than living such a life."

How my words struck him only he would know, but he replied- "Ramgulam, do you think anything will happen just because you have decided it? Whoever is born on this earth will one day die. No one will consult you in the matter. So while you are alive, keep yourself alive."

My heart was already heavy, and perhaps I lacked the mind to take in his meaning. Inside, I began to bristle with the thought: was the question I had come to ask Uncle the one I truly asked, or was it what he had said that I failed to understand and should have asked about?

Seeing me lost in thought, Manmohan Uncle said- "It is still evening. It is not yet so late that it is time for food or for sleep. Sit down quietly and tell me what you came to say."

I replied- "Uncle, in the family I see that there is

no love between anyone. Everyone keeps a grudge against the other. In society it is the same. People always say that service to others is the highest duty, yet they are constantly trying to pull each other down. Seeing this, I feel the same disgust toward society as I do toward my family. It makes me think that death would be better than living in such a way, witnessing such conduct every day."

When he heard me, Manmohan Uncle pressed his lips together and began to smile. The smile stirred irritation in me and I wondered why he was smiling, but I said nothing. Then he spoke.

"Ramgulam, do you understand that a human being is incomplete?"

I began to think about his words. Until now I had believed that in both my family and my village I was the wisest, that what I understood no one else could see. Uncle's thought seemed to be the opposite, so I asked-

"What do you mean by incomplete, Uncle?"

He said-

"As an individual, a human being is incomplete, but collectively, society is complete."

I turned this over in my mind and could see no real difference between society and the individual. A society is a gathering of individuals, and an individual is a part of that gathering. The person is tangible,

society intangible. When my thinking could not reach a conclusion, I asked-

"How is that, Uncle?"

As we were talking, Sudhiya Kaki came to the doorway with tea. At home I had drunk tea without wanting it; my mind had been too full of worry for it to bring any satisfaction. Here, I truly wanted to drink. Even the disgust I had been feeling toward family and society seemed to have softened. We both began to drink our tea.

After finishing, Manmohan Uncle handed his cup back to Sudhiya Kaki and said-

"Ramgulam, when you look at yourself with the whole world in mind, you will see that just as a single drop of water exists within the vast ocean, so is the place of the individual within society."

I could not fully grasp Manmohan Uncle's thought, so I said-

"Uncle, please explain a little more clearly."

He asked-

"Have you been able to fulfil all your needs in life entirely on your own?"

I thought for a moment and realised that neither I nor anyone else meets all their needs alone. Still, unsure what he was getting at, I said-

"Uncle, please explain it even better."

He said-

"You do your farming and produce food from your own fields, but for other things you have to go to the shop, do you not?"

"Yes, of course I do."

"And whatever you get from the shop is made by someone, is it not?"

"Yes, someone must make it."

"When you fall ill, you go to the doctor for treatment, and the illness is cured, is it not?"

"Yes, I do."

"You may fall ill yourself, but who cures the illness?"

"The doctor."

"That," he said- "is the collective body we call society. Society is made up of people of every kind, doing every kind of work. That is why society is complete, while the individual is incomplete."

I said-

"Uncle, the way the people in my family and in society behave has burned me so much that I feel both the family and society can go straight into the cooking fire."

Hearing this, Manmohan Uncle pressed his lips together and laughed heartily. Seeing him laugh only sharpened my irritation, but I swallowed it.

Then he said-

“Ramgulam, there are many kinds of illnesses that afflict society.”

At his words, I felt a faint stirring within, and suddenly I lifted my eyes to meet his. As soon as our eyes met, he seemed to understand and continued-

“Ramgulam, in society there is looting in the name of religion, exploitation in the name of social custom, exploitation in the name of divine wrath, exploitation in the condition of economic distress, and exploitation the moment one goes against the signals of landlord or master. There is also unrestrained exploitation of labour. All this has turned the colour of society dull and distorted. That is why you find society’s behaviour so low.”

Some of Manmohan Uncle’s thoughts I understood, and some I did not. So I said-

“And then?”

Clarifying his idea, Manmohan Uncle said-

“Just as the body has many organs, all working together to keep it alive, so it is with society. In the body there are healthy organs and there are weak ones, yet together they keep it in motion. In the same way, everyone has their own role.”

Without thinking, I said-

“Yes, there is such a role.”

Whether my answer brought him satisfaction or stirred some thought in his mind, only he would know. Smiling, he said-

“Ramgulam, you can see in the village that some people farm, some keep cattle, some are teachers, some are traders.”

I cut in-

“Yes, that is true.”

Manmohan Uncle said-

“Their work may be different, but they are all called part of the same village community, are they not?”

I said-

“Yes, they are part of the same society.”

Manmohan Uncle said-

“Each kind of work has its own importance, and everyone’s needs are met through one another. No single person can do every job alone, and no one can perform every task.”

I said-

“Yes, that is not possible.”

Manmohan Uncle said-

“According to his own interests, everyone should do one task suited to his own strength. This way one part of society is fulfilled, and harmony remains among all. That is what is meant by ‘One stroke, all

accomplished.'"

Hearing this, my mind did agree, but when I looked again at the ways of my family and the ways of society, my anger would rise once more. My thoughts would not settle. I said-

"Then, what should one do?"

Smiling, Manmohan Uncle said-

"Each of us is our own master, each of us has our own responsibility. Just as you have yours, so do I have mine."

I said-

"It is late enough for the evening meal. I will be going now."

I rose to leave, but Manmohan Uncle said-

"Ramgulam, keep your mind steady. The more unsteady your mind is, the more unsteady society will seem to you, and the more unsteady your family will become." ❑

World Peace

☰

Returning from school, Adauriya said to his mother- “Ma, tomorrow morning I will go to Guru Uncle’s house.”

The name of Guru Uncle set Aparajita thinking, as she tried to recall who he was.

Sensing her uncertainty, Adauriya asked- “You do not know Guru Uncle?”

Aparajita replied- “I cannot remember just now.”

Adauriya explained- “The one who lives in Uttarwari Tola.”

At the mention of Uttarwari Tola, Aparajita said- “Now I remembered.”

At that moment, she went to the courtyard trellis, cut a gourd, plucked about two kilos of brinjal, pulled up ten or twelve radishes, removed their roots and leaves, washed them clean, and placed them in a bag.

Early the next morning, after completing his daily chores, Adauriya came to his mother and said-

"Ma, I am going to Guru Uncle's house. I have a question to ask him. If I return late, I will not go to school; if I am back in time, I will attend school as well."

His mother simply acknowledged his words without adding anything more. When Adauriya was about to leave for Guru Uncle's house, she said- "Son, there is a gourd, and in the bag there are radish and brinjal. Take them with you and give them to Guru Uncle."

He hesitated for a moment, slightly puzzled, but his mother repeated gently- "When you go to someone older than yourself to seek guidance or advice, you should take a gift as an offering."

Until that moment, Adauriya had never truly understood such a gesture, but that morning it became clear. His father Sukhdev's words came back to him: "Son, in our time, and even before, when teachers did not receive a salary, the children—the students—would bring them a shanichara, a pice and a quarter kilo of rice."

Once, Adauriya had asked- "Why give them money and rice?"

Sukhdev had replied- "If you receive knowledge from someone, you must give something in return. When knowledge is taken without any offering, its worth begins to fade."

Back then he had heard his father's words without understanding them. But now, seeing his mother's actions, his father's meaning returned to him with sudden clarity. Holding the gourd in one hand and slinging the bag with brinjal and radish over his shoulder, Adauriya set out for Guru Uncle's house.

As soon as Adauriya reached Guru Uncle's doorway and saw him, he said- "I bow to you, Uncle. I have come to know the answer of a question."

While lowering his gaze Guru chacha blessed Adauriya, but he noticed the bag slung over Adauriya's shoulder and the gourd in his hand. His eyes lifted in surprise. It reminded him of an old tradition long observed here: whenever one received knowledge from someone, one would offer a token of respect in return. Even Dronacharya had taken Eklavya's thumb. Yet, another thought stirred in his mind—that if, in exchange for giving something, one always received something in return, if one taught only to be paid, then it became a transaction. The gift of knowledge is the highest of all gifts, and its sanctity remains only when it is given freely, without taking anything in return. Otherwise, it turns into an act of buying and selling.

Guru Uncle was still lost in his thoughts when Adauriya entered the courtyard and placed the bag of radishes and brinjal, along with the gourd, on the

eastern verandah, saying to Guru Uncle's wife- "Aunty, here is a gourd, and in the bag there are brinjal and radishes. Please keep them."

Hearing this, Sarojini guessed at once that her husband must have sent the boy, so she took them silently without comment.

Returning to the doorway, Adauriya touched Guru Uncle's feet in reverence. Guru Uncle reconised him by his face that the boy was from Southern colony, but he did not know exactly who he was, whose son he might be, or what his name was. Without knowing, he blessed him much as Ramananda Swami had once said to Kabir- "Child, recite Ram-Ram," saying- "Be well, child. May you be blessed."

Inviting Adauriya to sit before him with a gesture, Guru Uncle watched as the boy sat down and said- "Uncle, I have come to ask you the answer to a question."

Hearing this, Guru Uncle thought to himself that he did not know the boy well, nor his true nature. In such a case, how could he decide what kind of answer would be right for him? The world is what it is, full of both good and bad. If he were to call bad what is good or good what is bad, that too would not be right.

Caught in this uncertainty, Guru Uncle decided it would be better to know the boy before answering his

question. So he asked- "Child, what is your name?"

With the tone of a small child answering proudly, Adauriya said- "Uncle, in school my name is Adaurilal. My friends call me Adauri, and my parents call me Adauriya."

Guru Uncle asked- "Your father's name?"

Adauriya replied- "Sukhdev."

The moment Guru Uncle heard the name Sukhdev, he recognised him. Sukhdev from Southern colony was Adauriya's father. Guru Uncle had once given Sukhdev a cow to tend. As long as the cow remained in milk, Sukhdev kept coming to Guru chacha's place. When the cow grew old and died, that arrangement came to an end.

Guru Uncle asked- "What is your question, Adauri?"

Adaurilal said- "Uncle, the day after tomorrow there will be a programme at our school. The Education Minister will also be coming. All the teachers and students of our school will be present. There will be a seminar on the topic of 'World Peace'. The teachers will take part, and some students have also been given five minutes each to speak. I am one of them, and I have come to you for guidance."

Hearing the boy's question, Guru Uncle thought to himself that the greatest scholars of the world have pondered over this subject, and here was a child

wishing to speak on it. Yet he reminded himself that even if the universe and the divine are infinite, it does not mean a young mind cannot grasp them in its own measure. In school, in the village, and in the home, children constantly listen to and absorb what their elders and teachers say.

Guru Uncle asked- “Son, which class are you in?”

Adaurilal replied- “I am in the ninth.”

On hearing “ninth class,” Guru Uncle considered what the boy’s level might be. At least he would have heard the seeds of greater thoughts. Hearing is one thing, understanding another. Even if Adaurilal might not yet fully comprehend the subject, he had at least heard of it. Everyone knows that knowledge is of two kinds. One is verbal, and the other is practical. Verbal knowledge comes first, and when it is put into action, it becomes practical knowledge, which is the truest form of learning.

Guru Uncle said- “Son, do you understand the two words ‘world’ and ‘peace’?”

Adaurilal was a straightforward boy. A child’s mind is simple by nature, and he was the son of such parents and such a family where deceit and intrigue had no place. His dealings and thoughts were open and honest with everyone. Deceit and manipulation creep into families where stomachs are always full and business runs on a grand scale.

Adauriya said- “Guru Uncle, Master Sahib told us that everyone will have to speak for five minutes on the topic of world peace, so I have come to you to understand what I should say about it.”

Hearing the boy’s thought, Guru Uncle reflected that what Adauriya said was indeed correct. As he had heard from his teachers, so he understood, and so he spoke. He could not be expected to grasp that where each individual’s life is filled with unrest, bringing peace into the minds of all the world’s people is not child’s play. If the hope with which Adaurilal had come were not fulfilled, the boy might leave in disappointment.

Guru Uncle asked- “Adaurilal, who all will be present at the programme?”

Adaurilal replied- “Uncle, the chief guest will be the Honourable Education Minister. All the teachers of the school will be there—eleven in all—along with students from all four classes.”

Hearing this, Guru Uncle thought to himself that five minutes was hardly enough time. It was barely the time taken to sip a cup of tea.

Guru Uncle said- “Adaurilal, any speech begins with a salutation. Then comes the main subject, the matter you have to discuss, and finally you conclude your speech. So first tell me how you will give the salutation.”

Adaurilal said- “Guru Uncle, Master Sahib wrote it on the board and had us all copy it.”

Guru Uncle asked- “What did he write?”

Adaurilal took out the piece of paper from his pocket and began to read: “Respected Honourable Education Minister, Government of Bihar. Respected Principal Sir, respected Ravindra Babu, Khushilal Babu, Kedar Babu, Vimal Babu, Rudrachandra Babu, Singheshwar Babu, and Shubhkant Babu. Along with the present students and...”

Hearing this list of salutations, Guru Uncle realised at once that nearly four of Adaurilal’s allotted five minutes would be spent just on greetings.

Adding his own suggestion, Guru Uncle said- “Son, add one more line at the end: ‘In today’s world, unrest is the greatest problem of life. Without peace in life, peace in the world cannot be achieved.’”

By the time Adaurilal had finished writing, Guru Uncle felt a quiet relief. Yet his mind told him that on the subject of world peace, he should also speak to Adaurilal directly. He asked again- “Adaurilal, are you done, or do you wish to add more?”

Guru Uncle reflected that Adaurilal was still a child. If he gave him more to write, especially things whose meaning the boy could not understand, the audience might simply conclude that the speech had been copied from a book or dictated by someone else.

In that case, a third suspicion might also arise. He decided it would be better to let the written part remain as it was and explain verbally what the world is and what peace is, thus keeping his own conscience clear.

Adaurilal had no real sense of what five minutes meant, how much could be spoken or done in that time. He only felt vaguely that his speech was too short. He said- "Uncle, please add a little more."

Seeing the boy's curiosity, Guru Uncle felt not displeasure but satisfaction. Displeasure would have come only if the boy had been shirking work, which he was not. The eagerness to learn was alive in him, and that gave Guru Uncle contentment. Smiling, he said- "Son, first listen carefully to what I say. Later, if you feel like adding something from your own thoughts, you may add much, as you want."

This thought arose in Guru Uncle's mind for two reasons: first, he could meet the measure of the boy's curiosity without leaving him the impression that his elder had been careless in guiding him; second, the deeper ideas he held within himself were not yet within Adaurilal's reach. If the boy could not truly grasp them, then how can he prepare more.

Adaurilal asked- "Shall I hear it, Uncle?"

Guru Uncle said- "What do you mean by the word 'world'? What is the world?"

Adaurilal replied- “The world means the earth and all that is in it.”

Hearing the answer, Guru Uncle smiled inwardly, knowing that the boy was repeating exactly what he had heard from people’s lips and from his books. He had no idea that the world is the composite of three elements: Brahma, the soul, and Maya. Brahma is the essence of knowledge and bliss; the soul is the essence of life; and Maya is the essence of action and manifestation. Together they form the world.

In the same way, peace has its own nature. When knowledge transforms into trust and grows, peace is born in the human heart. That peace, as it deepens and matures, becomes a state of profound tranquillity.

Guru Uncle said- “Adaurilal, you do not have a watch, but there is one hanging on the wall. Look at it, then read aloud the speech you have written. From that you will know whether it fills five minutes or not.”

Hearing this, Adaurilal began to read. Being a child, he was not yet skilled at reading smoothly, and that too added to the time. By the time he finished his prepared text, the five minutes had been completely filled. ❑

The moon's Journey

☰

After three years, Vishnudev returned to the village. In truth, visiting the village had not been on his mind at all. The thought came suddenly when his name was mentioned for a programme to travel to the moon. Vishnudev was a scientist. The institute was sending three people to the moon for exploration and study. The moment he heard his name, he thought that there were still twenty days left before departure. He would be leaving on the thirtieth of November, so in the meantime he could go to the village, meet everyone, and come back. Thus, Vishnudev arrived in the village a day before the festival of Chhath's Kharna ritual.

By the time Vishnudev reached the village, evening had fallen. That day he did not go out to meet anyone. Being from a large family, simply talking with everyone at home kept him engaged till late.

The next day, around two in the afternoon,

Vishnudev went to see Padhua Uncle. Padhua Uncle had been a teacher at the village's lower primary school. He had retired two years earlier. Vishnudev had been his student for four years, from learning the alphabet to the lower grades, up to class three. Apart from being fellow villagers, the two shared a social connection, and the teacher–student bond deepened their relationship.

Sitting at the doorway, Padhua Uncle was quietly thinking about the Chhath festival. The thought crossed his mind that the oil pressed from the sesame seed is heavier than the seed itself. Such was the fervour of the festival that it seemed every Maithil family from other states had returned home with their families, and even those working abroad had also arrived with theirs. Whatever they would spend on the festival itself would be far less than what they had spent on travel fares, and the time lost in travelling would have been considerable too.

As soon as he arrived, Vishnudev touched Padhua Uncle's feet in greeting and said- "I seek your blessings, Uncle."

Although Padhua Uncle was over sixty years old, his disciplined life had preserved both the sharpness of his eyesight and the glow of his body. Blessing Vishnudev, Padhua Uncle said- "You used to come to the village once a year, every year. This time you have come after such a long gap."

Vishnudev replied- “Uncle, travelling with the family by public transport has become very difficult.”

He spoke briefly, but Padhua Uncle, understanding yet curious, asked- “Why is that, Vishnudev?”

Vishnudev said- “Uncle, for one, the number of thieves and pickpockets have grown so much that you can never tell when something might happen. And another thing, the water we drink in the village, people in the cities will not even accept as a gift. Buying drinking water during travel costs a hundred or two hundred rupees at least.”

Smiling, Padhua Uncle said- “People earn precisely so they can eat and drink. And in the cities they earn much more than the people in the villages. So if it costs money, even then it is still better than what the village offers.”

Vishnudev replied- “But throwing one’s earnings into the water is hardly a good thing either, Uncle.”

Understanding the figurative meaning in Vishnudev’s words, Padhua Uncle decided not to pursue that line of thought further and asked- “And how else are you, Vishnu?”

Vishnudev said- “I should say I am well. There is one piece of new news, and it is to share that with you that I came to the village.”

Padhua Uncle asked- “What is it?”

Vishnudev replied- "Uncle, you are not only my father's elder brother, you are also my guru. Even now I remember vividly that it was from you that I first learned the alphabet."

Hearing this, Padhua Uncle was deeply moved. A thought also passed through his mind that in today's environment, most people forget favours as easily as a bitter gourd sheds its bitterness, yet there are still some who always strive to acknowledge a kindness and remain grateful.

With quiet affection, Padhua Uncle said- "Vishnu, every person has their own responsibilities, just as they have responsibilities toward others as well. What was my duty I have fulfilled, and you may think of it in whatever way you wish."

Vishnudev said- "Uncle, on the thirtieth of November there is a scheduled programme to travel to the moon, and my name is among those being considered. So..."

Without fully understanding, Padhua Uncle said- "You will have my blessings."

Vishnudev continued- "Uncle, a team of three will go. More than ten people have applied. I have also applied. Selection will be through a lottery, so it cannot yet be said with certainty, but it seems likely that I might be chosen. It will be a space journey lasting a full month. I thought that if I were not able

to return from the trip, I should at least visit the village now and meet everyone. Of course, it is not certain that I will not return, nor is it certain that I will definitely come."

Hearing this, Padhua Uncle reflected on the immense potential hidden within the human mind. Until now, they had known and understood the moon in one way, but with scientific exploration, they were beginning to see it in quite another.

While Padhua Uncle and Vishnudev continued their conversation, Padhua Uncle's wife, Damayanti, came and stood before them. Unlike most women, who keep a little distance before making a request, Damayanti came directly before her husband. This was her own courtyard doorway, and she recognised Vishnudev as well, but still, keeping to her husband's manner, she stood silently.

Seeing her, Vishnudev rose, touched her feet in respect, and said- "Aunty, do you recognise me? I am Vishnudev."

Damayanti said- "How can one not recognise people from the same place? Besides, my eyesight is still as good as it was before. Where do you live now, son?"

Carrying the thread of thought forward, Vishnudev replied- "Aunty, as people in the village say, the worker knows his master's house just as the calf

knows its home."

At this, Padhua Uncle asked- "What work is it?"

Damayanti said- "Today is Kharna, and the bananas have not yet been riped."

Padhua Uncle said- "Today there is only a small quantity of bananas for in the leaf basket, is there not?"

Damayanti replied- "Yes, but the plantain is still unripe."

Padhua Uncle said- "Today is the village market. I will bring the bananas from there in the evening, as they will only be needed later."

Damayanti said- "The Sugarcane has not yet been gathered."

Padhua Uncle replied- "I will bring both the sugarcane and the bananas from the market."

Damayanti asked- "What about the plantain tree?"

Padhua Uncle said- "We have to offer plantain. Whether the fruit is ripe or raw, the Goddess of Chhath will hardly mind."

Damayanti was heading towards the courtyard when Sonelal arrived. Coming close to Padhua Uncle, he asked- "Uncle, have you heard the news?"

At Sonelal's question, Padhua Uncle wondered to himself which news this could be, for in the course of

a day one hears all kinds. He asked- "Sone, do I ever leave the doorway to hear anything? What news is it?"

Sonelal said- "It is very sad news, Uncle."

Hearing "very sad," Padhua Uncle's ears stood alert. What could be so tragic? He asked- "What is it?"

Sonelal said-

"Sharda Sinha has passed away."

Padhua Uncle had not known that she had been suffering from cancer. At once her mood sank. She had been admitted to AIIMS in Delhi, yet the illness had advanced relentlessly, and in the end she breathed her last. He asked- "What had happened to her that she died?"

Sonelal replied-

"Illness has neither beginning nor end that anyone can predict. I heard she had cancer for a long time, kept it hidden, and then it advanced so suddenly that it could no longer be controlled."

Padhua Uncle said- "Sone, this body of ours is a dwelling place for ailments. No one knows when or how illness will strike. With her, a great luminary of Mithila has come to an end."

Padhua Uncle was still talking with Sonelal, with Vishnudev seated before him, when Manchan arrived. Entering, Manchan touched Padhua Uncle's feet. Padhua Uncle blessed him and asked- "When did you

arrive, Manchan?"

Manchan worked for a tea company in Darjeeling. He said-

"I arrived the day before yesterday, Uncle, but I was busy making arrangements for the festival."

Padhua Uncle asked- "How have you been?"

Manchan replied-

"I have developed an ailment in both thighs, Uncle. I vowed to the Goddess of Chhath that if I were relieved of this illness, I would return to the village for the festival. That is why I am here."

Hearing this, many thoughts stirred in Padhua Uncle's mind, but he said nothing. Just then, Damayanti Kaki arrived at the doorway with four cups of tea.

On seeing the cups, Manchan took a tin of tea leaves from his hand bag and gave it to Padhua Uncle, saying- "Uncle, I brought this tin for you. It is tea that does not require milk."

Padhua Uncle asked- "What is the name of this tea?"

Manchan replied- "People call it green tea. This half of kilo tin will last at least fifteen days."

After drinking the tea, both Manchan and Sonelal rose and went. Vishnudev and Padhua Uncle remained seated.

Padhua Uncle said- "Vishnu, you are a scientist,

so your outlook is bound to differ from ours. What do you think of the Chhath festival?"

Vishnudev replied- "My life is tied to a fixed schedule, confined within certain limits, so I hardly get the time to think deeply about other subjects. Besides, it would not be right to speak to you about something I do not fully understand."

Padhua Uncle said- "Since there is a plan for you to go to the moon, you must have studied and reflected on the subject of the moon."

Vishnudev replied- "Uncle, the way the moon is regarded in society is very different from how it is seen in scientific terms. The programme is still in preparation. If, by chance, I get the opportunity to go and return, I will be able to share all the details clearly. For now, I am not in a position to say much."

Hearing Vishnudev's words, Padhua Uncle accepted in his mind that what Vishnudev had said was indeed correct. Padhua Uncle said- "Vishnudev, I do not know everything myself. Whatever I have heard from others, that is all I understand. But..."

Vishnudev asked- "But what, Uncle?"

Padhua Uncle said- "There are some thoughts on which one can reflect. Today is the fifth day of the bright fortnight of the month of Kartik, and it is Kharna. After partaking of the Kharna prasad, the devotees will remain fasting until the final ritual of the

festival. At dawn on the seventh day, at the pond’s ghat, they will offer arghya to the sun, and after that they will end their vow and take prasad. In between, they will remain fasting.”

Vishnudev said- “Uncle, I have seen all this with my own eyes and I understand it too, but...”

Seeing Vishnudev fall silent after saying “but,” Padhua Uncle felt that Vishnudev was not fully satisfied with his explanation. He thought it would be better to share what he knew so that his own integrity would remain intact.

Padhua Uncle said- “Vishnudev, some farmers mark the festival between bringing home the previous harvest, meaning the paddy, and sowing the rabi crops in the fields. In that sense, this festival belongs completely to the farmers.”

Hearing Padhua Uncle’s words, Vishnudev nodded in agreement, but from the perspective of his scientific knowledge so far, doubts began to arise. Padhua Uncle noticed this and spoke again.

“Vishnudev, although the offering of arghya during this festival is to the sun and not to the moon, the dates of Shashthi and Saptami are determined according to the waxing and waning of the moon, not the sun.”

Hearing this, Vishnudev was puzzled. After a moment, he asked- “Then?”

Padhua Uncle replied- "Vishnudev, the sun is the source of all life. Soil, water, and all else are formed by the sun's energy. The festival has scientific, cultural, and religious significance. Just as the sun contains seven colours, so too does life have seven colours. But there is one problem: the sun, which deserves to be worshipped every day, is honoured only once a year. The light of the sun is also seen as the light of knowledge. In the same way that the sun is not worshipped or honoured daily, the knowledge of human beings too is not always respected." ❑

Desolate

☰

Evening had set in when Shyam Babu reached Gopal's house. Gopal himself was not at home; he had gone to the market to buy medicine for his father. At the doorway, wrapped in a quilt and lying on a wooden cot, was Manmohan. Seeing him, Shyam Babu asked-

"Uncle, where is Gopal?"

At the sound of his voice, Manmohan sat up slowly and replied-

"Ah, Shyam my boy! Come, come, take a seat on the chair. You've come after a long while. Gopal has gone to the market, he should be back any moment now."

Hearing this, Shyam Babu sat down on the chair. Inwardly he thought, since he had come here for an important matter, how could he leave without meeting Gopal? And the work he carried with him was something that had to be settled today itself.

He was still mulling over this when Gopal arrived, pedaling in on his bicycle. Spotting Shyam Babu seated there, Gopal said-

"Brother Shyam! Father's health has taken a turn for the worse these past seven or eight days. I had to fetch medicines and show the report to the doctor, so I went to the market."

He leaned his bicycle against the wall near the entrance, placed the bag of medicines on the cot where Manmohan had been lying, and then stepped quickly into the courtyard, calling out to his wife-

"Make some tea."

Returning, he took a seat beside Shyam Babu on another chair, while Manmohan adjusted himself on the cot, resting against the wall.

Shyam Babu asked softly,

"Gopal, how is uncle doing?"

Gopal replied-

"Brother, it isn't too good. The illness has left its mark."

Shyam Babu said-

"Surely his age must have crossed eighty by now?"

At the mention of his age, Manmohan himself spoke up-

"My boy, I've already completed eighty-three

years, and now the eighty-fourth is running its course."

Just then, Aparajita, Gopal's younger daughter, appeared at the doorway carrying three plates of refreshments. Seeing the plates in her hands, Gopal turned to Shyam Babu and said-

"Brother, please eat a little first, drink some water. We can talk afterward at leisure."

Shyam Babu and Gopal had been friends since their days in the lower primary school. There was hardly a year's difference between them, only a few months in age. Though they came from different villages and different castes, their bond was strong. Shyam Babu belonged to Champapur, while Gopal was from Kamalpur. Champapur and Kamalpur were adjoining villages. In truth, they were less than a mile apart, but because of the way the boundaries had been drawn, they fell under two separate panchayats. To outsiders, though, the two villages seemed like one, so close were their ties.

The three of them, Shyam Babu, Manmohan, and Gopal, were still finishing their refreshments when Aparajita appeared again at the doorway, this time carrying three cups of tea on a tray. The men sipped their water and then moved on to tea. After a couple of gulps, Gopal said-

"Brother, the time for the formal proposal must

be drawing near?"

Shyam Babu replied- "The day after tomorrow, we will have the feast. That is why I came today to discuss everything."

Gopal asked- "And how have you thought of arranging it?"

Shyam Babu answered with a weary smile- "Gopal, the social environment has become such, and is still becoming worse, that people like us can barely breathe. Yet, as long as we live, we have to remain within this same society."

From their conversation, Manmohan understood that the matter at hand was Shyam Babu's daughter's marriage, and the upcoming feast related to it. The discussion went on for a while, and then Manmohan broke in gently-

"My boy Shyam, you are an educated and thoughtful man, so what can I add? But let me tell you this much: all my life, for these eighty-odd years, I have heard from people and seen with my own eyes that every age has had all kinds of people. The best of men and the worst of men both have always existed. Even in the golden age of Satya Yuga there were thieves and scoundrels, and today we live in Kali Yuga, where such things come even easier. As for my own life, if God grants anyone a son, let him grant a son like Gopal."

Hearing these words, Shyam Babu lifted his eyes and gazed at Manmohan with deep feeling.

When Shyam Babu kept looking at him intently, Manmohan felt within himself that Shyam Babu wanted to hear more. He said-

“My boy, we see it in our own villages and hear of it in others too, how sons mistreat their fathers. But my own life, the bond between father and son, has been such that even now it feels like the rhythm of day and night in a single season, ever constant, unchanged by the harshness of time. Of course, when nature strikes, storms and disasters do bring a momentary disturbance. For a while the cycle of day and night seems shaken. Yet soon enough, the order returns to what it was before. That is how it has been in my life.”

Both Shyam Babu and Gopal listened to Manmohan’s words with full attention, their minds turning over what he said. In the midst of this, Gopal stepped into the courtyard, filled a brass lota with water, then fetched a pill from the medicine bag and handed it to his father.

“Babu, take this now, and lie down for a while,” he said gently.

After giving his father the medicine, Gopal returned and sat again on the chair beside Shyam Babu. Shyam Babu said- “Gopal, the feast is fixed for

the day after tomorrow. You must be there."

Gopal did not answer at once. He sat in silence, though his mind was restless with many thoughts. Until now, whenever there had been a feast in the family, relatives and members of their own caste had always come and gone freely. Yet here was Shyam Babu, setting aside his twenty-household kin and instead calling upon him.

Seeing Gopal quiet, Shyam Babu spoke again-

"Gopal, five men will go. Father and brother Sushil belong to the household, so they are certain. That makes two. You will be the third, I myself the fourth, and we will take Budhan as the fifth."

At this, Gopal asked hesitantly,

"You mean you will not take anyone from your own kin, or your caste?"

Without pause, Shyam Babu answered-

"No."

Hearing this, Manmohan sat upright on the cot and said in surprise,

"Shyam Babu, such a thought...?"

Seeing Manmohan's startled reaction, Shyam Babu's heart flared like a smoldering fire, the kind that shows no flame on the surface yet burns deep and steady within. Hearing both his own half-spoken thoughts and his father Manmohan's words, Gopal

too felt shaken. He could not fathom why Shyam Babu had suddenly taken such a grave decision. Still, Gopal said nothing, keeping his lips sealed as though stitched shut.

Shyam Babu and Gopal were of the same age, classmates from school through college until their B.A. Shyam Babu, after graduation, passed the competitive examinations and entered the Bihar Administrative Service, while Gopal, left alone with his brothers, chose not to pursue employment outside. He stayed back in the village, devoted to farming and family life. From childhood, their ways of thinking had run along the same channel, which strengthened their bond and deepened their trust in one another.

Yet Shyam Babu carried a hidden wound. He was not merely displeased but inwardly pained by the character of his father, Ghanshyam Babu. In Champapur, there were four men, Ghanshyam Babu, Puhup Lal, Devkant, and Singheshwar, known for their malicious ways. They thrived on spreading lies, stirring quarrels, and dragging neighbors into lawsuits. Their eyes were ever fixed on seizing others' property. Even in matters of kinship and family rituals, in marriages and alliances, they sowed discord with fabricated tales, creating needless conflict.

What made it worse was that, in public, these four often posed as bitter rivals, standing against one

another like sworn enemies. Yet behind the scenes, they would join hands and weave plots together. The result was endless disputes in the community, filled with abuse, quarrels, and violence.

Shyam Babu could never accept even an ounce of his father's wicked nature or his destructive role in society. Time and again, he had tried to dissuade Ghanshyam Babu, but nature is stubborn. Once it takes hold, it clings, sometimes for life, until death itself severs it. Because of his father's relentless malice, Shyam Babu had regarded him as a true enemy of society from the beginning. For this reason, he had never placed the slightest trust in his father.

When Manmohan sat upright and fixed his gaze on him, Shyam Babu said-

"Uncle, the state of today's government machinery is something you yourself have seen as well as I. How deeply it has sunk into corruption. Here caste influence dominates, there communal pressure, elsewhere bribery and transactions, and again in another place the pull of regional interests. The entire system is entangled. Yet from childhood I had resolved never to wrong another and never to stain my character. That vow I have kept intact, and so long as I live, I will preserve it."

Manmohan responded warmly- "Wonderful, my boy. For this, you have my blessings."

Shyam Babu went on,

"Uncle, I am now arranging the marriage of my second daughter. Not a single coin is being given in dowry, just as in the marriages of my two sons not a single coin was taken in the name of dowry. What social customs are simple and natural, those I have always observed, and I will do so in this marriage too."

At this point Gopal interjected-

"Brother Shyam, why is it that you are setting aside your relatives and community and asking me to go with you for the feast?"

Shyam Babu replied-

"Gopal, even now my heart cannot accept that in the end a father would act as mine has, led by his malicious nature. But you have been my companion all my life. If you stand with me, then no matter what schemes my father plots, not even the malice of God himself could touch me."

Gopal bowed his head slightly and said-

"Brother, whatever command you give, I am ready to obey now and always in the future." ❑

Changing Thoughts, Diminishing Hope

☰

Thoughts grow, and with them hope and faith grow as well. Just as they rise, they can also diminish. When one's thoughts incline toward the good, toward noble ideas, hope and faith flourish. When they drift toward the base, toward ignoble ideas, hope and faith wither. Yet such a measure does not come easily to a person, for people rarely grasp the nature of events as they unfold. The reason is simple: human beings are prone to confusion. In confusion, the good may appear bad, and the bad may seem good.

In the village of Katharbouni, the family of Hridaynath had long been counted among the most prosperous and respected households, not only in the present day but for a full century past. Still, they were not considered the original inhabitants of the village, for Hridaynath's great-grandfather had come from outside to settle there. His ancestors had arrived from the west, from Bhojpur, and made Katharbouni their

home. For three generations, up to the time of Hridaynath's grandparents, the family spoke only Bhojpuri. After settling in Mithila, the later generations gradually began speaking Maithili.

Hridaynath's great-grandfather Krishnanand had served as a soldier in the Darbhanga estate. Even in that humble post, his mind was sharp and discerning, qualities that won him the estate's trust. Later, Krishnanand was appointed Kamatia, the overseer of a vast tract of three thousand bighas of estate land. The responsibility for cultivation and upkeep rested on him, while collection of land revenue was handled by the Patwari, Mukund. As chance would have it, both Mukund and Krishnanand hailed from the same region and shared the same caste. In time, they became related by marriage, with one's son marrying the other's daughter.

Quarrels and reconciliations were nothing new to the Mithila region, and Katharbouni was no exception. With funds from the estate, Krishnanand had a three-bigha pond dug, and on the eastern embankment of that pond he built his home. The estate's courthouse stood elsewhere, but the presence of that pond brought prestige to Krishnanand's family, raising them to the ranks of the village's honored households.

Time changed. The grandeur of the Darbhanga

estate faded into memory.

Hridaynath was a sociable man, free even of the slightest trace of prejudice over the fact that his family had come from the west to settle here while the original inhabitants of Katharbouni were from other lineages. Like a native-born son of the soil, he took an active part in community affairs, whether funerals, weddings, or any public or religious event, offering his presence and assistance, which strengthened his social bonds. Being from a well-to-do household and also educated, he was regarded as one of the prominent figures of the village.

With his sound financial footing, he also engaged in the trade of grain and water, including moneylending and interest-based transactions. Most of the native families of Katharbouni had suffered repeated losses from floods and river erosion, forcing them to part with their lands and properties. As a result, the majority of villagers became poor and worked as sharecroppers to survive. Until that time, Hridaynath's heart had not hardened enough to provoke social opposition; he continued to treat the natives with fairness. Yet he was well aware that his family stood apart in this place, having come alone from elsewhere to settle here.

Hridaynath had one son and three daughters. The daughters were married in the Bhojpur–Ara

region of the west, but for his son's marriage he resolved to choose a bride from Mithila. The reason was that by marrying into a Maithil family, the household would absorb Maithil customs into its own traditions, and relations with the Maithil community would deepen.

His son Manoj was a very intelligent and hard worker. He passed the matriculation examination in first division. Although a commerce student, his grasp of other subjects too was strong, and this helped him secure a good result. He enrolled at C. M. College for the Intermediate in Commerce, and alongside his regular classes, took private tuitions from college teachers. The reason for these tuitions was to build his backing, a network of connections.

With honors, Manoj completed his B.Com. in first division. While he was still pursuing his degree, Hridaynath began speaking of his marriage. In his mind was the wish that, just as his son was well educated, so too should his bride be educated.

Mithila remained, in many ways, unchanged. Men's education had long been valued, but women's education still lagged behind. Fortune favored them; a proposal came for a B.A.-educated girl, and the talks for Manoj's marriage began.

The practice of dowry was not confined to Mithila alone; it existed everywhere. Yet here it had a certain

distinction, since dowries were not uniform in value or form. In some castes the amounts were high, while in others they were relatively modest. For example, a B.A.-educated groom from one caste might command a far higher dowry than a similarly educated groom from another caste. Manoj belonged to a higher caste, so the expected dowry was naturally greater. After negotiations, the marriage was settled with an agreed dowry of thirty lakh rupees in cash.

Following the agreement, Manoj was married to a B.A.-educated young woman named Sheela. As in other marriages, family ties began to form between the two households, and the bond between Manoj and Sheela also grew. Along with the wedding came the custom of Duragaman, the ceremonial arrival of the bride at her husband's home. In earlier times this would take place in an odd-numbered year after the wedding, one year, three years, or five years later. With changing times, Duragaman began to occur alongside the wedding itself, as was the case for Manoj and Sheela.

Being a commerce graduate, Manoj secured a job as an accountant in the state's finance department. As a government employee, his salary was fixed according to official scales. In the modern climate, however, private-sector salaries, whether from domestic or international companies, often surpassed government pay. Manoj was on the

lookout for better opportunities and was eventually offered an accountant’s position in an international firm. Resigning from his government post, he joined the private company.

The salary was generous, and the benefits impressive. Two years passed quickly. During that time Manoj and Sheela were blessed with a daughter.

Up to this point, their married life resembled that of most couples, ordinary in its outward harmony.

Yet beneath the surface there was a quiet rift between them. In Manoj’s mind was the ingrained belief in a husband’s authority, while in Sheela’s mind was the memory of the thirty lakh rupees her father had given as dowry. Sheela held to the notion that her father had, in effect, purchased her husband, whereas Manoj viewed the dowry as a customary social arrangement. Sheela’s father, Yogeshwar, was an inspector in the state police, while Manoj’s father, Hridaynath, was a prosperous farmer of high standing.

In Delhi, Manoj worked while living with his family. The company had provided them with accommodation. Yet Sheela did not treat him in the manner most Maithil wives treated their husbands. All household chores were left entirely to the maid. Manoj could see that Sheela lacked the warmth and attentiveness expected of a wife, but since their

marriage appeared outwardly like any other, he kept his feelings to himself and endured it.

Life, however, has its own rhythm. Everyone wishes for a warm and trusting bond between husband and wife so that the family can live in peace. To lessen the restlessness in his mind, Manoj began drinking alcohol. Sheela noticed this change in her husband's habits. She was aware that drinking altered a person's behavior, and she could see this difference in Manoj, yet she chose to remain silent and bear it quietly. Being the daughter of a police officer, Sheela also had a strong belief that she could earn her own living if necessary.

Observing his wife's manner, Manoj began to feel inwardly despondent. He often thought that his married life, which was meant to uphold both family responsibilities and social standing, should have been peaceful. He wished for a home where the years ahead, with children and parents together, would be filled with harmony, but he felt this was not happening.

The demands of Manoj's job in the international company left him with little sense of time. His workload continued to grow. The office had its own canteen, so he often left home early in the morning and returned late at night. Disheartened by his wife's attitude, he began spending more and more time

away from home.

Five years after their wedding, the rift between Manoj and Sheela had grown so deep that they no longer wished to see each other.

Eight days before the Chhath festival, Manoj said to Sheela- “This year we will celebrate Chhath in the village.” Sheela readily replied- “That would be wonderful.”

Manoj then said- “When we go to the village, we will take all the festival items and clothes for my parents as well. Tomorrow we will finish all the shopping.”

The next morning Manoj and Sheela set out for the market with their four-year-old daughter walking between them. Manoj had drunk heavily. Sheela walked in front, the child beside her, while Manoj followed behind. At a narrow bend in the road, a truck approached from behind. As it came close, Manoj pushed Sheela. She fell beneath the rear wheels, and her life ended instantly. ❑

For Whom Did I Do It

☰

For the past seven or eight days I had not met with Sangi Uncle, and my mind was growing restless. Yet the ongoing land survey work had kept me so entangled that I could not find a moment to visit him. My house is in the southern quarter of the village, while Sangi Uncle's house is in the northern quarter. The different layout of our village is quite that of other villages. In most places, there are mixed hamlets where many castes live together, but not here. In our village, each caste has its own separate quarter.

For the past two months, a land survey has been in progress. The entire village has become so absorbed in it that some people spend their whole day following the survey clerks, while others trail the amin (surveyor). My own view is clear: I do not own as much land as some others, so once the work at the survey office quiets down, I will go there and get all my matters settled in a single day. But while in the village,

my own thoughts hardly matter, someone or the other is always dropping by to ask something. One person says the land record is missing, another says the title deed is lost, yet another complains that no rent receipt has been issued for years, and still another recalls that when the floods swept away their home, all the papers were ruined. My own case is much the same. When the 1987 flood destroyed my house, the land documents were soaked and decayed beyond recovery.

Once again, the thought of Sangi Uncle came to mind. We had been in the habit of meeting at least once every day, exchanging all kinds of conversation, yet for the past seven or eight days that had not happened. There was so much to catch up on, but what could I do? The whirlwind of survey work had kept me from seeing him. Sitting alone at the doorway, I resolved that today I would go and meet Sangi Uncle.

As luck would have it, at that very moment Ammarupi, a sister-in-law from the village, was passing by on her way to the market. I caught sight of her and called out- “Bhaujii, please wait a moment.”

As soon as I called out, Bhauji came closer, muttering to herself- “I am going to the market. It’s getting late. I have been so caught up with farming work that there hasn’t been a single moment free.”

I said- “Since you are already on your way to the market, go ahead. I have work there too, but I do not have a single rupee in hand, so I will first arrange for money and then go, maybe tomorrow or the day after.”

Looking unsettled, Bhauji asked- “Why did you call me?”

I replied- “It has been seven or eight days since I don’t met Sangi Uncle. I called you only to ask how he is doing.”

Ammarupi Bhauji said- “I have not seen with my own eyes, but I heard he has been quite ill.”

Sangi Uncle is ill! On hearing this, my eagerness to see him only increased. I said- “That’s what I wanted to know. You should go now, or you will be late for the market.”

Bhauji went on toward the market, and I decided in my mind that since I did not have to go to another village for any errands, I would go right now to meet Sangi Uncle.

Without even stopping for a snack, I got up and left. On the way, many thoughts came to mind, but I brushed them aside until I reached Sangi Uncle’s doorway. He was sitting on the wooden platform just outside. The sight of him reminded me of what Bhauji had said- but I immediately changed my mind about repeating her words. Since I was already here and he

was in front of me, why bring up that topic unnecessarily?

I said- “Uncle, my respects to you. I have been so caught up with this survey work that even food feels hard to digest. I spend the whole day running behind it.”

Sangi Uncle responded- “Rupalal, land belongs to the one who holds it firmly, otherwise it belongs to someone else.”

Hearing this, I could not help but smile, though I also wondered why people still spend their whole day chasing the amin, the clerks, and the survey office if ownership depends on firmness of claim. I kept my thoughts to myself and only said- “Uncle, it has been seven or eight days since we met, so I was feeling restless to see you.”

As soon as I spoke, Sangi Uncle replied- “Rupalal, I was beginning to think you must have fallen ill, which is why you have not been coming to this side of the village. Are you keeping well?”

I kept talking with him, but at the same time a corner of my mind kept returning to what Bhauji had said about him being unwell. I wondered how I could ask directly if he was sick. If he truly were, would he not have said himself- “Rupalal, I have not been feeling well lately”?

Just then Sugiya Aunty, Sangi Uncle’s wife, came

from the courtyard to the doorway. Without any preamble, she said- “Son Rup, I am not going to live much longer.”

I quickly replied- “Aunty, why speak such inauspicious words? Speaking of good brings good, and speaking of ill brings ill.”

Before I could say more, Sangi Uncle interjected- “Rupalal, you talk and think like the old folks.”

A little startled, I asked- “What do you mean, Uncle?”

He explained- “The people of earlier times believed and often said that speaking ill brings ill and speaking well brings well.”

I felt like responding to this, but as I prepared to speak, I held my tongue. Sangi Uncle understood. He could tell I wanted to say something but was choosing not to. Making his own point clear, he said- “Rupalal, speaking alone does nothing. Action is what counts. The one who acts, even without speaking, will succeed. But the one who does nothing and only talks big will achieve nothing.”

His words rang true in my mind, and I nodded in agreement. Turning the conversation toward what Ammarupi Bhauji had mentioned earlier, I tried to shift the topic, pulling a face as I said- “Uncle, your face looks troubled to me. Is something bothering you?”

In the entire village, if Sangi Uncle trusted anyone more than others, it is me. Perhaps it was because, whether or not I could always help with money or other things, I was always ready to stand beside him with my three-and-a-half-hand-long body in times of need. That kind of readiness naturally inspires trust.

Sangi Uncle said- “Rupalal, times have gone crooked.”

I could not understand what he meant by “times have gone crooked.”

Day and night seemed to be passing just the same as before. How then could time itself be crooked? I asked- “What do you mean, Uncle?”

He said-

“Rupalal, I cannot speak for others, for in some places fathers mistreat their sons, and in other places sons mistreat their fathers. But what has happened in my own life, I have lived through, so I will speak of my own case.”

Hearing him say- “I will speak of my own case,” I pricked up my ears and asked- “What do you mean, Uncle?”

He said- “I have two sons, as you know.”

I cut in- “Not only I know that, everyone knows it.”

Sangi Uncle continued- “Both brothers live in

Delhi. I hear they earn quite well."

I replied- "I have heard the same. Each of them owns a flat, has a four-wheeler, and send their children to a convent school."

Adding to my words, Sangi Uncle said- "My elder son's father-in-law developed cancer. He spent generously to get him treated in Mumbai. You know about that, don't you?"

I had not known, but in my own thinking, I have always believed that whenever possible, one should help others. And if he paid for his father-in-law's treatment, what harm was there in that? So I said- "Uncle, if a person helps another in need, is that not a good thing?"

Shifting the direction of the talk, Sangi Uncle said- "Rupalal, you too have not understood the whole matter, but..."

I asked- "But what?"

He said- "For the past three months I have been troubled by a painful illness, and it is getting worse by the day. An operation will be necessary. Many times I have spoken to both my sons over the phone, and their mother has also told them, but neither of them has paid any attention."

I said- "If they are not listening, then you have your own land and property. Sell it and get the operation done."

Sangi Uncle replied- “That is easy for you to say. I have this stomach ailment, and my wife’s eyesight has also deteriorated badly. Here in the village she manages to move around and do some small tasks by guesswork, but in the place where the operation would be done, would she be able to manage on her own?”

I said- “No, that would not be possible.”

Sangi Uncle continued- “The sons for whom I did so much, are they truly sons today?”

I agreed- “No, they are not.”

He asked- “Then you tell me, for whom did I do all this?”

What could I say? I remained silent. ❑

Service

☰

Early in the morning, when Bhushan Uncle went out for his walk, he saw from a distance that on both sides of the road, east and west, groups of women were talking among themselves. He kept walking forward, though in his mind the thought had already taken shape that something must have happened in the village and it was this incident the women were discussing.

As he walked along the road with his eyes fixed downward, watching the path closely, his ears were pricked, ready to catch some hint of the matter. Yet when he was still a little way off, the women continued their chatter, but as soon as he came near, they all fell silent. Thus, not a word of the conversation reached his ears.

Even though he had heard nothing, his mind kept turning over the possible nature of the incident being discussed. By the time he reached the main

road leading out of the settlement, there was still no clue.

That morning, Bhushan Uncle was walking alone, with no companion to exchange words with. As usual, he went as far as the village's southern boundary and then turned back home daily. On the way, he did meet two or three men and women, but they showed no sign of speaking to him, and he could not bring himself to ask them anything.

When he reached home after his walk, his curiosity had only grown stronger. The reason was the thought that if most of the people of the village already knew the news or the talk, then why was he still in the dark? Yet another thought came to him, softening his self-reproach: even though humanity has an immense history, there are such animals or creatures in the forest that a person may never have seen. So if he too did not yet know about some event in the village, what great loss was there in that? Still, the thought came to Bhushan Uncle that since this was a village matter, it was indeed surprising that he had not heard of it yet. After reaching home, another idea crossed his mind: even if he had not heard, his wife must have. Why not simply ask her and find out? Then again, he told himself, his wife was no different from anyone else. If he repeated to someone what she told him, and it turned out to be untrue, would he not be blamed for spreading it?

Lost in such weighing of options, Bhushan Uncle was sitting on a chair in the doorway when he saw Sumaritlal coming up the road from south to north. As soon as Sumaritlal came near, Bhushan Uncle called out- “Sumarit, you seem to have forgotten us completely!”

Since Sumaritlal regarded Bhushan Uncle with respect, he came straight to the doorway without saying anything, sat down on another chair, and replied- “Uncle, what can I say? I spend the whole day worrying about matters at home.”

Bhushan Uncle said- “You worry unnecessarily. Think about how the household can move forward and put your efforts into that work. Worry alone will bring nothing.”

Agreeing with him, Sumaritlal said- “Uncle, that is exactly what I try to think, but the family members are such that they never let my thoughts stay steady, nor let my mind be at peace.”

Without pursuing the subject further, Bhushan Uncle said-

“Sumarit, as long as you live and are part of family life, there will always be entanglements. So why are you getting unceasing worried forit?”

Finally Sumaritlal replied-

“Yes, Uncle, my own heart says the same, but sometimes it happens that I get caught in some sort

of web for no reason, otherwise I would simply leave the house."

Hearing this, Bhushan Uncle laughed and said-

"Sumarit, even if you leave home, life will still go on. What will you do then?"

Admitting himself at a loss, Sumaritlal said-

"That's exactly why I don't leave."

Changing the subject, Bhushan Uncle asked- "Sumarit, has any new incident taken place in the village?"

Sumaritlal replied-

"I have heard a faint hint of something, but I don't know it clearly."

Bhushan Uncle asked- "What hint have you heard?"

Just then, by coincidence, Janaklal was walking down the road from north to south. Seeing him, Sumaritlal said-

"Uncle, now we will know the whole story."

Janaklal was known in the village as someone who was always in the thick of every bit of news, spending his days stirring conversations and spreading talk. As soon as he came in front of the doorway, Bhushan Uncle called out,

"Janak, come here for a moment before you go any further."

Janaklal stepped up to the doorway and said-

"Uncle, my respects to you."

"Stay well," Bhushan Uncle replied. "Janak, what is the news in the village?"

"Uncle, a great injustice has taken place," Janaklal answered.

Hearing the words "a great injustice," Bhushan Uncle looked startled and asked- "What great injustice has taken place, Janak?"

Janaklal said- "Do you know Varaspati?"

"That same Varaspati who lives in Assam?" Bhushan Uncle asked.

Nodding, Janaklal replied- "Yes, yes, the same Varaspati."

"What happened to him?" Bhushan Uncle asked.

Janaklal began- "It has been nearly five years now. Before that time, he used to come to the village every year and send money home every month, enough to keep his family going."

Sumaritlal interrupted- "Who is in his family?"

"His parents have passed away," Janaklal said. "Only his wife and a daughter of about four and a half years are there."

"What happened to him then?" Bhushan Uncle asked again.

"Uncle, I will tell you everything as I understand

it," Janaklal replied.

Sumaritlal broke in again-

"Janak bhai, your house is right next to Varaspati's, so you must also know how much he spend on things like salt and oil."

Janaklal said-

"Uncle, for the last five years Varaspati has neither come to the village nor sent a single rupee."

Hearing Janaklal's account, Bhushan Uncle began to weigh the matter in his mind. If Varaspati's family, meaning his wife and child, were living in the village and yet he neither came home nor sent money, then how was the family managing? The more Bhushan Uncle thought, the more different questions arose. He decided it would be best to first hear from Janaklal exactly what he knew. Only when one reaches even a small part of the root of a problem can it be properly understood. Speaking without knowing could easily turn out to be wrong.

Steadying his thoughts, Bhushan Uncle said-

"Janak, tell me what you know."

Janaklal replied-

"Uncle, I have not seen it with my own eyes, but I have certainly heard it with my own ears."

Sumaritlal broke in-

"Are you giving testimony in court now, the way

you keep hedging? Just say what you know."

Janaklal said- "Sumarit bhai, I have heard that Varaspati is living with a woman in Assam and has even married her."

Laughing, Bhushan Uncle said- "Janak, for many years I have heard that the tribal women in Assam turn our menfolk into cattle, tie them to a peg in the fields for grazing all day long and when they themselves return home in the evening, they bring the men back too, and at home treat them again like men."

Janaklal, who had also heard such talk from old folks, said- "Uncle, I have heard the same, so I agree with you, but I have not seen it myself."

Bhushan Uncle asked- "If Varaspati has not sent money for four or five years, then how is his family managing?"

Janaklal answered- "Uncle, his wife is quick-witted. Sometimes she does a bit of sowing and planting; otherwise she spends most of her time gossiping here and there."

Bhushan Uncle said- "All right, she can do what she likes. That is not the point. Tell me what happened today."

Janaklal said- "The last time Varaspati left the village, his wife was pregnant. About seven or eight months after he had gone, a daughter was born. She

is a very beautiful child."

Bhushan Uncle thought to himself that such a thing was certainly possible. Carrying the thought forward, he asked- "Was the child brought up entirely by his wife, meaning Varaspati's wife?"

"Yes," Janaklal replied.

Sumaritlal interjected-

"All right, she did what she did. But what exactly happened today?"

With a look of surprise, Janaklal said-

"Sumarit bhai, sometime during the night, that woman left the little girl sleeping and ran away from the house."

Bhushan Uncle asked- "Did she run away alone, or with some man?"

Janaklal answered- "Uncle, it is not yet certain whether she went with anyone, but what is clear is that she has left home. In the morning, when Marni, meaning Varaspati's daughter, woke up and did not see her mother, she stayed quiet for a while but then began to cry, and she has been crying ever since."

Hearing this news, Bhushan Uncle called out to his wife. When she came and stood in front of him, she asked- "What is it?"

Bhushan Uncle said- "Let us all go and bring that child, Marni, here to our home and take care of her.

She is a girl, and when the time comes for her marriage, we will give her to someone as our own."

Hearing his words, his wife stood silently. Bhushan Uncle then turned to Sumaritlal and asked- "Sumarit, what do you think?"

Sumaritlal replied- "Uncle, there is no greater religion than serving another human being. I support your thought not just fully but with all my heart."

"And you, Janak, what do you say?" Bhushan Uncle asked.

Janaklal answered- "Uncle, what you are thinking is exactly what I am thinking as well." ❑

The Poverty of True Vision

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Durlabham Bharate Janma means that to be born in Bharat is a rare fortune. But why is it said so? What is the special quality or uniqueness of India that makes being born here considered such a high privilege? The answer lies in the fact that one who is born here grows and lives within the ethos of Indian culture.

The greatness of Indian culture has been that here wealth, luxury, and power have never been valued as highly as the moral worth of life itself. Greater respect has always been given to those who walk the path of restraint, purity, and virtuous conduct, even if from the material point of view they live in scarcity.

In the realm of knowledge, India has long held a place of honor, even if in today's world many other nations have advanced further. From ancient times,

the moral character of human beings here has been of a high order. On one side, the creation of such lofty character has been nurtured by a philosophy rooted in spirituality; on the other side, systems of power have often fostered the growth of degraded character.

It is well known that centuries of foreign rule in India did not only plunder its wealth but also its art, culture, and heritage. Even those who explained and spread India's spiritual philosophy were not entirely free from fault. Most ordinary people, then as now, have been ignorant of the deeper truths of that philosophy. Many interpreters of spiritual thought, wishing to make their own lives more comfortable, presented explanations to the masses that served their own advantage, leading to the continued exploitation of the common people.

Just as every region has its villages, there is also a village named Madhavpur. In that village lives a man named Jugai, a cattle herder by occupation. Jugai is a simple and straightforward man who knows nothing of farming, and so he spends his days tending cattle. For those whose cows he herds, there is a fixed monthly payment, and this is the foundation of his livelihood.

Just as everything changes from moment to moment, people's thoughts also keep changing. This is how the good can become bad, and the bad can

become good. We see that people with noble ideas sometimes adopt base tendencies, while those with the lowest thoughts adopt virtuous habits and make their lives successful. This does not mean that all good people become corrupt, or that all corrupt people turn good. Good people can adopt even better qualities and become better still, while bad people may also deepen their bad habits and become worse.

Jugai herded the cows of four or five families. He worked in two daily shifts. In the morning shift, after the cows were milked, around eight o'clock, Jugai would eat his breakfast, walk along the lanes, untie each cow, and lead them out to the pasture. Between eleven and twelve, he would bring the cows back from the pasture and tie them at their respective owners' posts. Then Jugai would go home, bathe, have his meal, and rest for a while. In the afternoon, he would again go to tend the cows. The owners paid Jugai a fixed monthly wage for his herding work.

When the month came to an end, Jugai went to collect his pay from Rameshwar. Rameshwar was a man well-versed in religious texts and legends. Though he had never received formal schooling, he had gathered his knowledge of scriptures through devotional gatherings and self-study. He sustained himself in the village by wandering about, telling stories, and reciting religious tales to both his own community and others. He did not earn through

physical labor, yet his standard of living was comfortable enough.

That day Rameshwar was sitting at his doorway. As Jugai reached him, he said- "Uncle, the month's herding is over. Please give me my wages."

Rameshwar, accustomed to living off others' earnings and skilled in the art of smooth talk, heard Jugai's request and responded in a playful tone-

"Jugai, wages for what?"

"For herding your cow, Uncle," Jugai replied.

Just as a courtesan's voice can be sweet, so too can that of a cheat. In a gentle tone, Rameshwar said-

"Jugai, do you not know what the Vedanta, the scriptures, say about this?"

Simple and unlettered, Jugai replied- "No."

Rameshwar said- "In the Vedanta it is written: Sarvam Brahmamayam Jagat."

Not understanding what Rameshwar meant, Jugai said- "Uncle, I am not an educated man. My father died when I was a child, and since then I have earned my living by herding cows for the people of the village."

Rameshwar continued- "Son, our scriptures say that the entire world is pervaded by Brahmamay. You are Brahma and so am I. Then why are you asking for herding wages, and how can I give them to you? Tell

me that."

Jugai had no knowledge of such tricks and reasoning. So in his mind he thought that, like other dishonest men, Rameshwar Uncle too was cheating him out of his wages. This was no different from the way he must have cheated in his earlier dealings. Jugai decided he would stop herding Rameshwar's cows from the next day.

Resigned, Jugai said- "Uncle, I am going now."

"Yes, yes, go," Rameshwar replied.

Jugai set off toward home. A person's thoughts rarely rise beyond the limits of their own knowledge. On the way, Jugai kept telling himself that from tomorrow he would not herd Rameshwar's cows. But then another thought came: if he stopped, what other work was there for him to do? And almost immediately a third thought arose: there is no shortage of work in the world; he could leave Rameshwar Uncle's cows and tend the cows of someone else instead.

With these thoughts running through his mind, Jugai left that place and went to the home of Rita Lal Bhai.

Everyone in the village knew that if anyone could match Rita Lal in being sharp and shrewd, there was no one. In speech and in action, he was unpredictable. No one could say when he would turn a 'yes' into a 'no'

or a ‘no’ into a ‘yes.’ Yet society itself is like the sea, deeper than the ocean and larger than the mountains.

Rita Lal was in the garden. His wife was standing at the doorway.

Going up to her, Jugai asked- “Bhauji, where is Bhaiya?”

Rukmini replied- “He is in the southern garden.”

As soon as Rukmini spoke, Jugai walked toward the southern garden. Seeing Rita Lal Bhai, Jugai said-

“Bhaiya, I have come to meet you.”

Rita Lal asked- “Why?”

Jugai replied- “The month is over, give me my pay.”

Rita Lal said- “Jugai, have you remained a child all your life?”

Startled, Jugai asked- “What do you mean, Bhaiya?”

Rita Lal said- “Haven’t you heard of Lord Buddha? There are two kinds of men, one is Mayavi and the other is Tathagata. Lord Buddha’s other name is Tathagata.”

Hearing this, Jugai just stared at him blankly. Then Rita Lal continued- “Jugai, do you not even know what the great Buddha said?”

Not understanding the subject, but curious

about Buddha's words, Jugai replied- "No."

Rita Lal said- "Buddha said Sarvam Kshanikam Asti. It means everything is momentary. The cows you herded before are now dead, and the cows that are here now are their calves. You are no longer the same, and I am no longer the same. We have both been reborn anew. Now tell me, for which work are you taking payment, and for which work am I to give it?"

Hearing this, Jugai's heart sank. Seeing such open dishonesty, he felt like crying, but feeling powerless and helpless, he turned away and walked toward his home in tears.

A little further on, he saw Sonai Baba approaching from the opposite direction.

Sonai Baba was the oldest man in the village and also known as a man of his word. Whatever he said- he would do, and whatever he did, he would say.

Coming closer, Sonai Baba saw Jugai weeping and asked- "What happened, Jugai, that you are crying like this?"

Jugai said- "Baba, you know I earn my living by herding cows, and that is how my mother and I survive. I have a monthly arrangement, and when the month was over, I went to ask for my wages from Rameshwar Uncle and Rita Lal Bhaiya. Rameshwar Uncle said that everything is Brahmamay, and Rita Lal Bhaiya said that the one I was before is not the one I

am now, and the one he was before is not the one he is now, so why should he pay me?"

Hearing this, Sonai Baba thought to himself and understood that Jugai had fallen into the net of two tricksters. It is because of such petty cheats that India's spiritual philosophy has been reduced to poverty, and whatever remains will also soon be destroyed.

Sonai Baba said- "Jugai, do not cry. Go back to the village cheerfully. Tomorrow, as usual, go and take both their cows out to graze. On your way back, tie both cows at your place. When they come looking for them, repeat their own words back to them."

Jugai found wisdom in Sonai Baba's idea, and the pain in his heart began to lessen.

The next morning, he did exactly as Sonai Baba had instructed. In the evening, when the cows did not return to Rameshwar or Rita Lal, both men, shivering like frost-bitten cane in the cold month of Paush, came to Jugai's place and found their cows tied up. Without saying a word, both handed over his wages and took their cows home. ❑

Thirty-Two Teeth

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At dawn, as soon as I woke up, my mind began to race toward the day's work. Lying on the cot, I started thinking about everything that needed to be done today. The moment these thoughts began, my heart filled with happiness. The reason for the joy was that at eight o'clock in the morning Gopinath would be coming to buy cabbages. His daughter's wedding was near, and just yesterday he had agreed to buy fifty kilos of cabbage at fifty rupees per kilo, which comes to five thousand rupees a quintal.

I calculated in my head and realized that fifty kilos would fetch me twenty-five hundred rupees. The thought of that earning filled me with satisfaction. I reminded myself that since I had fixed the time with Gopinath for eight o'clock, I needed to have the cabbages cut and all their outer leaves removed beforehand. Still lying on the cot, another thought came to me that the day after tomorrow was the

Janakpur fair, the Vivah Panchami festival. For years I had longed to visit Janakpur, but each time it had remained just a wish. One year I did not have the money, another year work was so overwhelming that I could not get leave. This time the circumstances felt favorable, with fresh income in hand and my other work already in order.

I glanced at the clock hanging on the wall. It was six o'clock. There were still two hours before Gopinath's arrival. As I planned the work, I realized I had to cut twenty to twenty-five cabbage heads and get them ready. Judging by the time, it seemed like an easy task.

Suddenly my mind wandered to the cabbage field. I had cultivated cabbages on two katthas of land. About twenty-five to thirty plants had heads weighing less than a kilo, but the remaining four hundred plants had heads weighing between two to three and a half kilos. Altogether, the yield would be at least ten quintals, perhaps more. Ten quintals of cabbage meant fifty thousand rupees. The thought of such an income made me smile inwardly with delight.

Happily, I got up, washed my face and hands, brushed my teeth, rinsed my mouth, and told my wife-

"Hurry up and make tea. I have to go cut cabbages."

My wife already knew that Gopinath would be

coming at eight in the morning to buy cabbages. As soon as I spoke, she, just as on any other day, did not linger by the hearth and quickly began preparing tea in the kitchen. By the time I had washed and dressed, she had the tea ready.

It was made, but because the milk was from a cow that had recently calved, it curdled. The curdling ruined both the color and taste of the tea. Somehow, swallowing my disappointment, I drank it, though instead of feeling refreshed my mood grew slightly irritated. Still, I did not take it out on my wife, nor did I speak harshly to her. Quietly, I set out for Subudh Uncle's house.

Subudh Uncle was known as one of the most hospitable people in the village. He had built a spacious, welcoming doorway and maintained the dignity of that space. This meant that if travelers or strangers happened to be passing through and night fell, they could stay at his place without hesitation. The wide courtyard was always open to them, and there was never a shortage of food or drink. This was something known not just to the villagers but to people in the surrounding region as well, so it was common for lost or weary travelers to stop there for the night.

Of course, half the people from the village might have modest homes, but in the cities most people now had proper accommodations, so travelers rarely

stayed elsewhere. In the villages, though, it was still the same—roads and embankments might exist on paper, but in reality only a fraction had actually been built. I mention roads and embankments here so that you do not confuse them with water supply or sanitation projects.

Subudh Uncle rose at four in the morning, went to relieve himself, washed up, and made tea for himself. After drinking it, he sat in the doorway just as the sun was rising. Soon after, villagers who had no tea at home would start arriving. One of his qualities was that he never looked down on anyone, and because of this most of the villagers saw him as a member of their own family. With people coming from all sides of the village, he naturally came to know nearly every bit of news in the community.

By the time I reached his doorway, four or five men were already sitting there. "Uncle, my respects to you," I said as I entered.

Just then the first pot of tea had been brewed. By the second pot, Sumitra Kaki arrived at the doorway carrying six or seven cups on a tray. She set the tray down in front of us and went back inside. I stood up to serve the tea, and once everyone had a cup in hand, Subudh Uncle said- "I hope you are well, Kisun. How are things with you?"

I replied- "It's the same as before, uncle. No new news."

Subudh Uncle said- “I hear your cabbage crop is doing well.”

I replied- “How could it be called good, uncle? Good would mean a large crop, but that’s not the case. It’s only on two kathas of land.”

I was just about to share my thoughts when Jiyalal spoke up-

“Uncle, yesterday evening an incident happened in the village.”

Hearing the words “an incident happened in the village,” my ears perked up, and Subudh Uncle too leaned in, asking-

“What happened?”

Jiyalal said- “Uncle, Jibach Uncle called Puhup Lal to his doorway, tied him to a post, and thrashed him thoroughly in front of everyone.”

Hearing this, I asked- “Jiyalal bhai, why did Jibach Uncle beat Puhup Lal?”

Jiyalal replied- “For no particular reason. While playing, there was a quarrel among the children, that’s all.”

I had only heard the bare details, but Subudh Uncle listened with grave attention and said- “From the look of him, Puhup Lal is sturdy and strong, but...?”

In my own mind, I too was thinking that by his physique, Puhup Lal was the sort who could easily

throw Jibach Uncle to the ground single-handed, yet he was beaten soundly and could not strike back.

I asked- “But what, uncle?”

Subudh Uncle said- “Puhup Lal is under the thirty-two teeth.”

I had heard this phrase before- “under the thirty-two teeth,” but until now I never understood its true meaning.

I asked- “What does it mean, under the thirty-two teeth, uncle?”

By then, Subudh Uncle had also sipped his tea and chewed his betel leaf. His mood had lightened. Spitting to the side, he said- “Kisun, since you’ve asked, I’ll tell you from the root of it. But it will take an hour to explain.”

An hour, I thought, where would I find that much time now? Gopinath would be coming for the cabbages. I had only come here for a cup of tea. I drank it down and said- “Uncle, I’m in the middle of work right now. I’ll come in the evening, then I’ll listen to everything from the beginning.”

Leaving Subudh Uncle’s place, I hurried back and cut twenty cabbage heads. Seeing the twenty heads, I was satisfied that they would weigh at least fifty kilos. I had just reached the doorway with them when Gopinath arrived carrying a sack. As soon as he came, I brought out the village balance and the five-kilo

weights from the courtyard and weighed the cabbages. About two kilos overflowed, which I gave him as well.

Handing me twenty-five hundred rupees, Gopinath said- “Kisun, if work is scarce, I’ll come again.”

I replied- “Do not worry about that. If the work lessens, you may come yourself, otherwise I will send someone.”

Even so, in my mind, Subudh Uncle’s words kept echoing, and I resolved to visit him that very evening. After all, he had said with his own mouth that it would take an hour to understand.

At sunset, I reached Subudh Uncle’s place. It was fortunate that no one else was around. By the time I arrived, he had already finished his evening routines and was seated at the doorway. As soon as I reached, I said- “Uncle, my respects.”

Subudh Uncle replied- “Stay well. It is good that no one else is here right now. The meaning of ‘under the thirty-two teeth’ is to work with strength.”

I could not quite grasp what he meant. I said- “Uncle, please explain a bit more clearly.”

Just then, Sumitra Kaki arrived at the doorway with tea. The two of us drank together. After sipping the tea, Subudh Uncle said- “Kisun, to do exactly what one says, that is manliness. From this comes

immortality."

There was no concealment in his words, yet their meaning was not entirely clear to me. I began to hesitate, and he seemed to notice. Clarifying, he said-

"Kisun, due to the pressure of society, meaning the pressure of social behavior, and the pressure of authority, meaning the pressure of governance, the common person has remained under the thirty-two teeth."

I had certainly heard his words, but still could not fully understand. I said- "Please explain more clearly, uncle."

Subudh Uncle said- "Kisun, throughout the history of humankind, meaning from the time human behavior advanced a little beyond animal behavior, the majority of people have fallen under the thirty-two teeth, and still remain there. One may say that humans are free, yet they carry such a burden of subjugation that they can do nothing entirely of their own accord."

I half understood and half did not. Still, I told myself that such a subject cannot be grasped completely in a single sitting. Even if one hears it once, if one's own practical life remains different from it, then hearing is not the same as understanding. True understanding will only come when one shapes life accordingly. I said- "Uncle, please...?"

As if reading my thoughts, Subudh Uncle said-

“Kisun, every person must shape their own habits, their own personality, and their own life.”

I asked- “How does one do that, uncle?”

Subudh Uncle said- “By bringing freshness into one’s daily work, life itself becomes fresh. This attracts not only oneself, but also others around.”

I asked- “How can that be understood?”

Subudh Uncle said- “From a person’s state of mind, one understands. As is the state of mind, so is the behavior and the work. It has grown quite late tonight. Go now. I will tell you more tomorrow.”

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Notes